

ROSH HASHANAH 5781-2020

I have never been as aware of my breath as I have been these past 6 months. A few weeks into our surreal quarantined lives, I began to notice the pattern of my own breathing: how often I inhale deeply or exhale with a sigh; or when I run out of air trying to finish a sentence. Inside my mask, I became aware of the warmth and moisture there. In the chilly March air, I was grateful for this. In July, as the sweat dripped down my chin, I cursed it. And then there is the bliss of feeling fresh air on my face as I take off my mask and breath freely in the safety of my own home.

Breath, this precious life force, has taken on new meaning for me, for us. It has both a literal and a metaphorical grip on our lives. We feel it in the fear of how COVID can attack the lungs; in the choke-hold of racial violence; in the bad air that comes from forest fires and pollution, and in the masks that constantly remind us of that ubiquitous act we so often take for granted...that is until our breath is compromised.

Rosh Hashanah, more than any other day, elevates breath. According to our tradition, today is the day that God created Adam, man, humans, us. God formed us from the dust of the earth and blew into our nostrils the *nishmat hayim* – the breath of life – and we became living beings. (Gen 2:7) Divinity filled our lungs and we sprang forth, animated into life.

Our breath, our breathing, day in, and day out, and right now, is a trace of divine activity, a sign of God's ongoing being and presence. This universal act not only connects us to the sacred, it connects us to all that breathes - human life, animal life, plant life. It's 'breath-taking' when you think about it, this most personal and most universal of processes.

During this horrible pandemic, there have been times when it has been a struggle for me to feel connected to that 'greater power for good' that some of us call God. Perhaps for you too. Where is the spirituality in Purell? How can I sense and respond to the emotional needs of

my neighbor from 6 or 10 feet away or of my co-worker in the two-dimensional zoom room? Online worship doesn't work for everyone. Leading services to a screen and an empty room is, honestly, not entirely fulfilling. I miss having all of you present with me, living our Judaism together. But maybe we can find a new source for spiritual connection despite these less than satisfying experiences. Perhaps this focus on breathing that has been thrust upon us, can be a source of meaning in the midst of all of this chaos.

The Hebrew word for breath is *N'sheema*. And, the Hebrew word for soul is *N'shama*. --- The connection between breath and soul, which is so clear in the Hebrew, may not be obvious as to us, we who live in the world of science, who understand the molecular structure of oxygen. To us air is just another part of the physical world. It may be virtually invisible and somewhat undetectable, but it is no less material than a rock or a pen. But to the ancient world such an obvious assertion was not at all evident. Air was so non-physical as to be downright spiritual. It was so omnipresent as to be on par with God. For our ancestors, air was permeated with divinity and so all breathing beings, all of us, were and are as well.

To take a deep breath – is to feel your lungs expand, your chest open up, your shoulders swell! It is to experience a unique undeniable feeling of being full, even complete. Is that really only air? Could we join our ancestors in linking this all-to-often unnoticed act as something holy?

My brothers and I were there when my father took his last breath. I remember it, a swift intake and then a soft release. Quite quickly we could see that, not only had he stopped breathing, he had stopped *'being.'* With his last *N'sheema* breath, went the energy that animated his charming, wise and loving essence, his *N'shama*, his soul. My dad, a doctor and scientist, would never have described the moment of death in these terms. But I do. To witness such a moment is for me an affirmation of the sacred within us.

While this mindset might be hard for some of us to embrace, breath and breathing, even from the most scientific perspective, bespeak an awe and a beauty and a wonder that is inspirational. Neil DeGrasse Tyson, a famous astrophysicist, affirms that there are more molecules of air in a single breath than there are breaths of air in the Earth's entire atmosphere. (Allow me to repeat that, there are more molecules of air in a single breath than there are breaths of air in the Earth's entire atmosphere.) Therefore, we can surmise that some of the molecules of the air that we are inhaling right now have passed through the lungs of King David, Joan of Arc, Beethoven, Martin Luther King, and possibly even the grandparent whose name you carry. As practical and rational as many of us are, it is impossible to deny the power of this image.

During this pandemic thousands of people have died alone, with no one to hold their hand or stroke their hair or witness their last breath. This has brought me to tears many times. And yet, there can be comfort in the fact that with each breath, my mask on or off, the air I draw in may contain the molecules someone exhaled in a final breath; and now perhaps they are less alone, and so am I.

TAKE A BREATH! Consider its meaning. --- Consider its potential. --- Consider the harmony and unity this often-unconscious deed invites.

And, consider what it would mean to be denied your breath.

We cannot explore the spirituality embedded in our breathing without confronting the words "I can't breathe"; and the emotions unleashed in the injustice of the breath of life being squeezed out of one man by another. We must take in the far-reaching racial injustice that was exposed in those 8 minutes and 46 seconds when George Floyd was denied his God given right to *N'shama* – breath and soul.

It is painful to imagine constantly living in fear of "I Can't Breathe."

While our masks may be an annoyance, most of us “Can Breathe.” Our tradition would say that to restore breath to one who is not able to breathe freely is a fulfillment of our partnership with the Divine; our responsibility to bring the sacred and the just into the world. Emma Lazarus said this with the words that have come to define our America – America that embraces the tired, and poor and huddled masses all yearning to breathe free!

Today, Rosh Hashanah, is the anniversary and celebration of God’s gift of breath. To commemorate this day, God commands us to do one and only one ritual act. We are instructed to hear the sound of the Shofar. A sound that can only be created by our breath. --- The shofar blower inhales deeply, then exhales, starting and stopping her *n’shama*, her breath, her very soul, creating that evocative blast that wakes us up, calls us to our better selves, to justice and love, and to life. How wonderful that we begin our year by mirroring God’s most enduring creative act. How empowering and how relevant in this unprecedented time.

I imagine all of you, sitting at home, breathing, *calmly, deeply* – I hope more aware than before of the potential for spirituality in this innate act. With or without a mask, as we breath in and out, each in our own homes, we together affirm the link between divinity and humanity, the bond between God’s *Nishama* and ours.

May the coming year find all of us, and all people breathing freely and in good health. With each breath, may you fill your lungs and your soul with meaning and connection and so release back into the world justice and love.

Shana Tova

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